# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

Volume XII, Number 21 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 22, 1951

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*Theatre Openings*

"Faithfully Yours" "Buy Me Blue Ribbons"
"Love and Let Love" "A Sleep of Prisoners"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 22, 1951*

*Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.*

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK MIRROR

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# "Love and Let Love"

## Daily Mirror

October 20, 1951

### 'Love & Let Love' Is Love's Labor Lost for Ginger

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It was wonderful to have Ginger Rogers return to Broadway last evening, after so lengthy an absence in Hollywood, but we do wish she had chosen a more amusing and rewarding vehicle than Louis Verneuil's "Love and Let Love." The theatre desperately needs personalities who can draw money into box-office tills, and Miss Rogers most certainly fills the bill.

However, comedies like Verneuil's are not calculated to be the kind of competition required to lure entertainment-seekers away from their radio and television sets. Even when they boast an outstanding star like Miss Rogers. The new arrival at the Plymouth Theatre is a formula play. An experienced playgoer can call every shot before it's fired.

"Love and Let Love" has to do with a flighty and flirtatious actress who finally proposes to her best male friend and confidant, an elderly diplomat, when her prosaic but efficient sister steals away an artist over whom she is temporarily gaga. The resourceful statesman maneuvers a situation which reunites the star and a young doctor, who has been madly in love with her for the past 10 years.

Our State Department could use to advantage the talents of a diplomat like Charles Warren. It's too bad he wasn't assigned to handle the Korean muddle. Our Asiatic policy would have been in able hands, for if you can solve the problems of so unstable and temperamental a personage as Valerie King, Russian and Chinese Communists should be pushovers.

Miss Rogers plays Valerie with effervescent gestures and a squeaky, piping voice, and her sister, Ruth Gage, with the deliberation and emphasis of a veteran radio announcer reading a commercial. As far as we are concerned, Mrs. Gage could have been omitted from the script, but then it would have been even more painfully thin.

As it is, the Verneuil work could stand copious shots of comedy vitamins from a resourceful play doctor. It is difficult to understand how Verneuil could give us so lack-lustre and pedestrian a frolic as "Love and Let Love," when he is represented just across the street at the Music Box by so polished and delightful a romp as "Affairs of State."

The dependable Tom Helmore is a tower of strength to the skimpy script as the romantic physician, and the reliable Paul McGrath gets more from the role of the diplomat than Verneuil wrote into it. The veteran David Perkins must have been recalling the days of glory when he appeared with such eminent stars as Richard Mansfield, James O'Neill and Viola Allen, while making a few entrances as a sympathetic butler.

Producer Anthony B. Farrell evidently spent a fortune on Ralph Alswang's handsome setting and Jean Louis' smart costumes. We are getting superlative decor and fashion shows this season, when what we really need are a few fine comedies and dramas.

The Rogers fans will love Ginger and her stunning gowns, but we doubt that they will find "Love and Let Love" a match for her sparkle. We trust that she will forget this setback quickly, and remain with us until she finds a straight play or a musical worthy of her.

**"LOVE AND LET LOVE"**

Comedy by Louis Verneuil; staged by Mr. Verneuil; setting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Jean Louis; presented by Anthony B. Farrell at the Plymouth Theatre, October 19, 1951. The cast:

Dr. Fred Stevens.. Tom Helmore
Shirley..... Helen Marcy
Harlan..... David Perkins
Charles Warren.. Paul McGrath
Valerie King.... Ginger Rogers
Ruth Gage..... Ginger Rogers

Synopsis: The action takes place in Charles Warren's home in New York City. Time: The present. Act I. Scene 1. An evening in May. Scene 2. Later the same evening. Act II. Scene 1. The following Sunday. Scene 2. That evening. Scene 3. Later the same night.

## New York Post

October 21, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

### Misadventures of Ginger Rogers

It is quite possible that "Love and Let Love" is the dullest comedy I have ever seen. I wouldn't, however, want to say this dogmatically, because who would dare be dogmatic about the theater these days? Who would have thought it possible that the drama season, after offering such a low ebb as it provided Wednesday with "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," could have grown worse with "Faithfully Yours" the following evening, and ended the week with a new nadir in poor Ginger Rogers' vehicle, "Love and Let Love," which opened at the Plymouth Friday night? It is not a pleasant spectacle to contemplate.

Reports from Broadway wiseacres say that this new play by Louis Verneuil was improved considerably during its out-of-town tryout. Imagination reels at any such thought. If "Love and Let Love" in its current manifestation is an improvement over its original version, what must it have been when it began its ill-fated career several weeks ago in distant parts? Even after experts have worked on it, Mr. Verneuil's comedy is an almost incredibly witless and inept little disaster. It must have been a dandy when the hapless provinces first gazed upon it.

**Display of Courage**

The only thing commendable about the venture is Miss Rogers' courage in sticking with it gamely. I can't speak very highly of her performance, because it is considerably less than brilliant. One role would have been trying enough for her, but the author has provided her with two, a beautiful actress and her mousy sister. Obviously, she knew from the start that her vehicle was collapsing beneath her. Nevertheless, instead of rushing back to Hollywood in dismay, she held on grimly and somehow brought the wreckage into town. I suspect that it was foolish of her, but she certainly deserves applause for determination.

If her years in Hollywood have by no means improved Miss Rogers as an actress for the stage, she remains nevertheless a young woman of considerable distinction. She looks both dashing and handsome, and she has the presence and authority of a star, if not all of the histrionic equipment. They have certainly dressed her like a star, too. It is perhaps not the greatest compliment that can be paid to a hard-working and conscientious actress to say that her gowns are more sensational than her performance, but at least she wears them with a manner.

**Heavy Trifle**

It is a little difficult for me to tell you what the play is about, because it isn't about much of anything. It is a trifle, but without lightness. I believe it has something to do with how a wise diplomat, if you will forgive the contradiction, sees that a famous actress, who thinks she wants to marry him, is really in love with a young doctor, and tactfully arranges for them to get together. There is much talk about traveling to distant places and some feeble striving after epigrams. The one time I was amused was when the comedy's tedious characters described some off-stage people as being dull.

Tom Helmore, a pleasant and forceful leading man, does everything possible with the role of the romantic doctor, but Paul McGrath is rather bogged down in the part of the understanding diplomatist. The direction struck me as negligible. Ralph Alswang has provided a lavish set showing a lot of books, and they are the most unread-looking volumes I have ever seen. To get back to it, dullness is the final, inescapable quality of "Love and Let Love." It is of the all-pervading kind that eats into the soul and could well drive men mad.

Journal American

October 20, 1951

# Just a Bad Comedy

By ROBERT GARLAND

There were fears that Ginger Rogers' gowns might look the worse for wear before Ginger Rogers' first play got into town. But such is not the case. Miss Rogers' first play is at the Plymouth and Miss Rogers' gowns look better than new beside it.

**This "Love and Let Love" is, according to Ginger Rogers, not exactly what was originally ordered. I do not doubt it! For what Miss Rogers has got from Louis Verneuil is an old French farce of uncertain vintage. It never could have been amusing.**

And all the sprucing up, from dressmaking to rewriting, doesn't make the "new comedy" seem any newer and more comic. Neither does Ginger Rogers, try as she does. In this unfortunate week in the legitmate theatre, "Love and Let Love" is no helper.

* * *

## Enter Tom!

Paul McGrath is a middle-aged man of importance. A diplomat or something! He lives in a Ralph Alswang apartment here in New York. Between lovers, Ginger Rogers throws herself on him. He is her friend and that's what friends are for.

**But Paul knows such things are not to be. So he brings Tom Helmore into the picture. Tom, who used to know Ginger in the get-along days, has loved her ever since he can remember. He loves her now. He will love her forever. And he does.**

There's another plot in which Ginger Rogers is Ginger Rogers' sister. But don't let's go into that. Suffice it to say that she and her sister haven't any reason to be at odds except that it gives Ginger a chance to appear plain and attractive.

* * *

## Not Convinced

Under the direction of the French author, who was supposed to play Mr. McGrath's part originally (and I think he did!), Paul McGrath is dignified and every inch a gentleman. But he doesn't believe what he's doing. I don't see how he could.

**Tom Helmore plays Tom Helmore. I like his dinner-coat more than Mr. McGrath's. It's not so Hollywooden. The others, who are David Perkins and Helen Marey, do nicely. No one ever owned a nicer butler and nurse, if that's what Miss Marey is.**

As for Ginger Rogers, herself and not a talking picture, she's in the current Hollywood-come-East tradition. I wouldn't understand if you paid to see her act. But I might understand if you paid to see her. But Louis Verneuil's "Love and Let Love" is a bad play.

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NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 20, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

*Walter F. Kerr, drama critic of "The Commonweal," will be the guest critic of the Herald Tribune during the fall season.*

### *The Sixty-fifth Misses*

There is a lot to be said for the pot-boiling star vehicle. When it is done with skill and relish it helps keep the theater in business. And Louis Verneuil, who has written Ginger Rogers' new vehicle, is normally a hackmaster at this sort of thing. "Love and Let Love," which opened at the Plymouth last night, is his sixty-fifth produced play.

Mr. Verneuil's formula is to take a standard fairy-tale and dress it in upper-echelon manners; the fairy tale element more or less assures the play's popularity, and the fancy dress keeps it from seeming naive. Add to these values the presence of a charming and authoritative star, and it is fairly hard to go wrong. "Affairs of State," the author's contribution to last season, did not go wrong.

"Love and Let Love" does. One thing a mechanically-written play cannot afford is to reveal its mechanics. In the current piece they show at every turn. The characters are piloted on stage as in an all too apparent chess game, and they are forced into some exceedingly random plotting when they get there. The play ostensibly concerns a romantically skittish young actress who is guided through a series of amorous misinclinations by a benevolent diplomat. But the real play tends to belong more to the diplomat than to the actress, the actress is further forced to share the spotlight with a sister whose presence is by no means necessary to what goes on, and when it is time for the final curtain we find that very little in the way of romantic interest has ever developed.

Much more serious, however, is the failure of the star to take over and supply the warmth and brilliance which might save the evening.

Ginger Rogers struggles bravely through this tangled, and, for the most part, unamusing charade, but she has not the resources to deal with it. She is beautifully gowned, and she makes every entrance count. Once she is on, however, she relies on voice tricks which are not emphatic enough, and on a giddy and monotonous rate of speech which is not altogether easy to listen to.

The script is responsible for some of these difficulties. Because, for a brief scene, Miss Rogers must also appear in the role of her sister, she is forced into distinguishing the two voices. She pitches one high, the other low, in an unnecessarily obvious manner, and then must cling to what she has established even after the need for any distinction has disappeared. She never does seem to relax into anything resembling a natural tone, and this makes for an artificial and disappointing performance. Miss Rogers works hard, but unluckily seems to be doing so, and to one who has, from time to time, admired her in films, this comes as a blow.

Paul McGrath, as the diplomat-confidante who succeeds in guiding the actress to a young doctor who has conveniently hung around all evening, is delightfully urbane and unfailingly good-humored. He is able to make indifferent lines sparkle, and an ill-defined character plausible. A great deal more of Mr. McGrath would have done the evening no harm. Tom Helmore, as the young doctor, handles a thankless part with a minimum of desperation.

According to out-of-town reports, a good many hands have gone into the shaping of what turned up at the Plymouth last night. They have not succeeded in shaping a coherent comedy or a rewarding commercial vehicle.

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The New York Times

October 20, 1951

## Ginger Rogers Returns to Broadway in a Double Role in Verneuil's 'Love and Let Love'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Even by the standards of the current week, "Love and Let Love" is a stupefying play. This is the comedy in which Ginger Rogers has come back to New York at the Plymouth, where she appeared last evening. When she was acting here in "Girl Crazy" in 1930, she was generally admired, and it is easy to admire her today.

For she is beautiful and alive and has a sunny sense of humor. She can also act with bounce and animation. There are one or two moments when, by golly, you think there may be the merest suggestion of something worthwhile in the current vehicle. No one that gorgeous can be entirely overwhelmed by a playwright's dullness.

* * *

But Louis Verneuil, author of "Affairs of State," and of "Love and Let Love," has come about as close to overwhelming her as anyone can. Ever since this comedy opened, it has been so vociferously in trouble that even the Alaskans must have heard about it by now. Well, whatever the trouble was originally, the play cannot be much better now. For "Love and Let Love" is hackneyed and empty and almost aggressively uninteresting.

It is the story of one of those dazzling but unstable theatre stars whose follies of the heart fascinate playwrights who never get more than a few yards away from a theatre. Two unattached gentlemen, who seem to have no real occupation, discuss her with excitement for about ten minutes early in the play. Suddenly you hear her chattering in the wings, and, presto!, she is on stage in a breathtaking costume.

* * *

For the rest of the evening the problem is: Is she going to marry a fatherly diplomat without visible portfolio or an eager young medical practitioner who has been in love with her for years? Only professional men of stable income can enter these bean-bag contests in the theatre.

"Love and Let Love" has one of the advantages of a double feature. In one brief scene Miss Rogers, who spends most of the time impersonating an actress, impersonates the actress' sister. Having been luminous, radiant and gush-

## "Love and Let Love"—*continued*

ing, she is plain, drab and contralto for a few minutes. This device saves a salary and also proves that Miss Rogers can look like almost everybody else if she wants to.

But there is really no reason why she should not look like herself as much as possible. For that is one thing she has a monopoly on, and it is very good, indeed. Getting her through the evening requires the services of a few other actors—of Helen Marcy, who plays an adoring secretary efficiently, and of David Perkins, who plays the ancient butler with a minimum of egregiousness.

It also requires the services of Paul McGrath and Tom Helmore, who devote themselves exclusively to getting the lady engaged to the right man. It would be interesting to know what goes on in the minds of actors who have to wait on the temperamental heroines of stock comedies. Mr. McGrath behaves as though he were embarrassed, and no one could blame him. The dubious role of the middle-aged counselor who is so much wiser than young lovers is hard to keep from looking kittenish and chagrined.

* * *

As the explosive but faithful swain, Mr. Helmore has a more palatable part, and plays it with skill and humor. Something should be said in recognition of Ralph Alswang's commodious setting of a very cultured home with severely-matched books that no one ever takes off the shelves; and of Jean Louis' upper-class costumes.

Something already has been said in recognition of Miss Rogers' personal splendor and gifts as an actress. They are considerable, and it would be exhilarating to see them at work on a real play. "Love and Let Love" is a polite bore. Mr. Verneuil is a gentleman, but he should not insist on writing like a gentleman so consistently.

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DAILY NEWS

October 20, 1951

# Ginger Rogers Visits the Legit In a Comedy, 'Love and Let Love'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Hollywood, frightened into its wits by TV, has recently been conducting an institutional campaign under the catch phrase, "It's Movietime, U. S. A." As part of its devilish clever maneuver, it has been deploying squads of screen players to make personal appearances through the country and remind us that movies are good entertainment. It's a slick scheme and it has sold me; for instance, I'd rather see Ginger Rogers in a movie than in the play I saw her in last night.

Ginger's play, by Louis Verneuil, is titled "Love and Let Love." It's at the Plymouth Theatre. It is an entirely well-intentioned but not very sparkling comedy which gives Miss Rogers the opportunity to wear several changes of clothes and to play dual roles—a volatile actress and a sensible hausfrau with three kids. I could tell which was which, too.

**A Man Gets Her.**

Hardly anybody seemed to be worried about the plot last evening, so there's no reason you should have to get worked up about it. Two men, Paul McGrath and Tom Helmore, love Miss Rogers (the actress one, not the sensible mother) and finally one of them gets her. This is accomplished in a handsome living room designed by Ralph Alswang.

When he wrote the successful "Affairs of State," Mr. Verneuil had a point of view from which to work—a slightly sardonic glance at Washington politics, plus a gentle leer at sex. There doesn't seem to be any particular point of view in "Love and Let Love," unless it is Miss Rogers. She is very decorative and well decorated and she has a couple of cute comedy tricks like putting her forefinger on her front teeth or chewing a piece of caviar with her back molars. It is, really, a very charming personal appearance.

We've had quite a few of these p. a.'s lately. Ann Sothern and Robert Cummings night before last, and Signe Hasso, Melvyn Douglas, Janis Paige, Jackie Cooper and, for all I know, Baby Leroy in a character part in some play. All these theatrical visitations have convinced me about that "Movietime, U. S. A." campaign. Movies really are good entertainment. As a matter of fact, the best, smartest and most delightful show I've seen so far this season is "An American in Paris" at the Radio City Music Hall.

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New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 20, 1951

# Ginger Rogers Play Proves She's Game

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Nobody can deny that Ginger Rogers is game. Having got involved in "Love and Let Love," a project she clearly hates, she has brought it to Broadway as originally agreed.

Every fiber of her being must long ago have told her to close it up and run for her life. As it is, her irritability and dejection show through everything she does on the stage.

The play is a cobweb that Lynn Fontanne would have trouble making anything of. Miss Rogers never pretends to race in the same class. Aware that a lot of people are coming to see her, willy nilly, she has dressed her best and hung on.

**Plays Dual Role.**

Here is an actress, flippant and selfish, about to lose her beau to her sister, a girl with darker hair, slower speech and grimmer manner. Needless to say, Miss Rogers plays both girls. Chances are the irresistible lollipop of a dual role is what led her into all this in the first place.

An older man, to whom the actress at one point proposes, foists her beau off on her sister where he belongs. He then unites the star with his doctor, whom she has secretly loved all along. The manipulator sits down happily to his supper, alone.

Mr. Verneuil, the author, has presupposed an adoring public, famished for any glimpse of an idol, regardless of what said object is up to. We do not have such audiences, and Miss Rogers is not that kind of a girl.

**Tries for Laughs.**

She tries to get laughs by twisting her mouth and ending a sentence in a squeak. It is no go.

She is left like a blue-eyed baby trying to make portable toys out of wet sand, unaware that she has forgotten to take off her mittens.

Miss Rogers wears devastating affairs of pink, then orange with leopard skin, then white with rose-type trim. In her deeper desperation she plays out to the house with a Merman delivery. Last night this was risky. She might well have been stopped by the sight of such landmarks as the left aisle seat of the first row, where Miss Hope Hampton sat, or the right same, where Miss Gloria Swanson sat and waited.

**Talent in Audience.**

Dietrich, who can stop even a good show, thoughtfully sat farther back. And that seemed about all the Hollywood talent in view for the really mammoth crowd that lined both sidewalks outside.

Paul McGrath easily came off best in the company, smiling agreeably through his role as the older friend, content to remain a pal. Tom Helmore, one of our most attractive leading men, did as he was told without snarling.

# "Faithfully Yours"

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

October 19, 1951

## 'Faithfully Yours' Opens at Coronet

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Ann Sothern and Robert Cummings may hope they are playing right along with what their picture public wants in "Faithfully Yours."

The show sounds like the minor half of a double bill at a late-run house. It is one thing in a movie to have such forced archness call itself comedy. You know the participants have progressed in real life to better things, and only their shades must go through identical motions on 79 screens at the same time.

When actors are actually committed in flesh and blood to repeat such aimless confusion, you marvel at their perseverance.

The play defies logic and the most ordinary laws of wit and taste. A rich attractive couple rumple their lives when the wife tries psychiatry to stimulate the husband's interest in her person. Her advice comes from a full-time wolf, who has all the enthusiasm her husband lacks for her charms.

The play depends on ponderous misunderstanding for its plot, and on labored double meanings for its jokes. It has two or three legitimately comic situations. Most of the time it begs the audience to laugh at the hero screaming when he backs into a sofa pillow, at his recognizing his secretary from a rear view and at his sly innuendo about the frequency with which he vows to wind his clock.

As a helpless devotee of Miss Sothern in pictures, I can only applaud the attentiveness and quiet gaiety with which she performs on the stage. She never overvalues her material. If it shocks her to realise how pointless it all is, she graciously gives no sign.

• • •

She sports an endless series of elegant costumes which cumulatively suggest she expects some real fascinating guests who never arrive. This fashion parade is delightfully distracting. Let it be said, too, that Miss Sothern apparently has title in fee simple to the figure she exhibits.

Robert Cummings was driven by opening night excitement to fall back on an alphabet of camera tricks. He mugged, snorted, shivered and hopped, entirely for the benefit of the onlookers, and never as if what he did should convey an idea to another character. He seems personable and will doubtless relax.

Philip Bourneuf plays the doctor as simply as possible, which is a happy, profitable solution.

Last night's audience tried hard to laugh, but its applause was limp at the curtains. Since the show already has a big advance, future houses will surely care more about seeing the stars than what they do, and everybody will be more contented.

**"FAITHFULLY YOURS"**

Comedy by L. Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay, based on a play by Jean Bernard-Luc; staged by Richard Whorf; setting by Paul Morrison; presented by Richard W. Krakeur at the Coronet Theatre, October 18, 1951. The cast:

Vivian Harding.... Ann Sothern
Thomas O. Harding.....
Robert Cummings
Stokes.....Victor Wood
Susan.....Marguerite Gould
Dr. Peter Wilson.....
Philip Bourneuf
Betty.....Eileen Erskine
Miss Parker.....Doreen Lang
Gracie.....Florence Sundstrom
Joyce.....Beverly Whitney
Vera.....
Barbara Barondess MacLean

Synopsis: Time: Today. Scene: The entire action of the play takes place in the living room of the Harding' penthouse apartment in New York City.

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New York Post

October 19, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

## A Comedy Called 'Faithfully Yours'

Hard as it may be for you to believe, I think that we reviewers may owe a slight apology to young Jay Robinson, whose unfortunate brains we kicked out in our notices yesterday. Mr. Robinson's vehicle, "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," and his performance therein, were just as inept as we cruelly said they were, but it is my impression at this moment that they caused me less suffering than I endured at the Coronet Theater last night while watching an alleged comedy about psychoanalysis called "Faithfully Yours," which had its local premiere there.

And certainly Mr. Robinson's acting the previous evening was no more disastrous than the playing in "Faithfully Yours" of a dashing movie actor named Robert Cummings. Mr. Cummings, who is a well-known name in Hollywood, was apparently under the misapprehension that he was still doing cinema farce, and his excessive mugging and whimsical coyness were something that is rarely seen on Broadway these days. Being one of those actors who believes in always doing something when he is on the stage, his performance is at least energetic.

**From the French**

Although the mocking of the excesses of psychoanalysis is not perhaps the freshest of theatrical topics, it might well make for an excellent and richly deserved satirical comedy, and "The Philemon Complex," the play from which L. Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay have adapted "Faithfully Yours," is, I believe, still a hit in Paris. Since movie names are said to have a considerable audience draw in this vicinity, it may even be a hit here. It is, nevertheless, a play chiefly notable for its laborious dullness.

It has, I repeat, a good farcical idea. A young husband and wife are quite happy in their devoted marital life until a dubious psychoanalyst, with amorous purposes in view, persuades the foolish wife that her spouse is in need of his professional attentions. The husband's very fidelity, it seems, is to be looked upon as suspect. There is, she is persuaded, something unhealthy about it, and it is her duty to bring three of her girl friends to their home and throw them at him in the hope of straightening him out. The ending is presumably happy.

In addition to the colorless dullness of the writing, "Faithfully Yours" suffers from a curious lack of inventiveness in developing its story. It is my impression that there isn't a scene in the play that is really ingenious or comic. Despite the grimmest determination on the part of everybody to be hilarious, the narrative plods along with a frantic kind of heaviness, making its points with the most elephantine effort. The gay French touch is certainly missing.

Although Mr. Cummings, no doubt in a gallant effort to enliven things, is the worst offender among the actors, it seems to me that Ann Sothern, another film celebrity, is far from deft as the fatuous wife. Then, just to prove that the movies are not entirely to blame, Philip Bourneuf, ordinarily an expert player, is singularly colorless as the psychoanalyst. As for Richard Whorf's direction, it is as arch and labored as the play. Only Paul Morrison's set is commendable. Forgive all of us, Mr. Robinson!

The New York Times
October 19, 1951

## Ann Sothern and Robert Cummings Appear in Satire of Psychoanalysis, Entitled 'Faithfully Yours'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

If splendor were sufficient, "Faithfully Yours," which opened at the Coronet last evening, might succeed in passing for a play. Ann Sothern overwhelms it with her personal blonde luster, to say nothing of a stunning wardrobe of gowns; and Robert Cummings looks handsome and elegant. Paul Morrison, the scene designer, has drenched it in affluence and luxury. No one could afford to live in his New York penthouse on an income of less than $40,000 a year; and wealth is always reassuring in our bankrupt theatre. You know that you are associating with the best people when you see a set as lavish as Mr. Morrison's.

* * *

The chief characters in the comedy by L. Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay are smart enough to match the décor. Like truly fashionable people, they are appalled by the idea of being normal, and the wife has gone to a psychoanalyst in the hope of overcoming her husband's obstinate fidelity. This is a good idea for a brisk satire on modern witchcraft. "Faithfully Yours" is based on a play by Jean Bernard-Luc, and ought to be hilarious.

For it is the story of an empty-headed wife who reads a little of the occult science and begins to worry about her husband's constant devotion to her and his regular habits. Conspiring with a practitioner, who is also a notorious philanderer, she tries to persuade her husband to be unfaithful for the sake of a healthy married life at home.

"Faithfully Yours" hopefully teeters on the edge of sin all evening. Starting on the ironic premise that psychoanalysis is the very disease it professes to cure, the authors invent as many ludicrous situations as they can. But they are not witty writers. They are industrious playsmiths with more faith in European farce technique than we have here. "Faithfully Yours" does a lot of facetious capering, but it never pulls itself together and faces the subject satirically. The authors really do not have their hearts in sin.

Miss Sothern is a very pleasant woman to have on the premises. Following the involutions of the plot, she scampers prettily through the evening. Since the material is so ordinary it is probably academic to observe that she does not do much more with her lines than speak them intelligibly; she gets the surface tones without the satiric inflections.

* * *

As the harried husband, Mr. Cummings gives a lively performance, though not one that is extraordinarily original. Not to be too severe with him, it is fair to add that the material is not original, either.

As the quack psychoanalyst, Philip Bourneuf gives another of his thoroughly professional performances, dry and sharply outlined. Victor Wood is entertaining as a terrified butler. Under Richard Whorf's animated direction, the other members of the cast get through the evening creditably.

But for all the splendor, high spirits and wickedness, "Faithfully Yours" is a fairly empty, old-fashioned script. Someone with a harder style ought to be able to make something genuinely satirical out of the foibles of psychoanalysis.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 19, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

*Walter F. Kerr, drama critic of "The Commonweal" will be the guest critic of the Herald Tribune during the fall season.*

### *Just Plain Frigid*

ANN SOTHERN and Robert Cummings, recruits from Hollywood, are trapped in a singularly witless and out-of-date farce at the Coronet. "Faithfully Yours," adapted by Ladislaus Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay from a play by Jean Bernard-Luc, seems totally unaware that psychiatry is not precisely a new field for comic investigation, that broad farce requires something more than mild domestic conversation, and that even the zaniest plot asks for some semblance of lifelike motivation.

The evening at the Coronet is relentlessly, and naively, psychiatric. A happily married young woman, having just come from a performance of T. S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party," decides that her husband's fidelity is abnormal. Aware that she is never going to get her husband to the professional couch, she undertakes to psychoanalyze him by proxy. Guided by an unlikely practitioner, she probes her husband's subconscious, explores the possibilities that he has murdered his father and felt incestuous love for his sister, and ultimately concludes that his fidelity "neurosis" can only be cured by a transfer of his love for her to one of her bridge associates.

* * *

We are subsequently treated to an interminable second-act scene in which husband and wife discuss the respective appeals of three women we have not yet met, and to no less than three scenes of desperate double-entendre in which the wife's friends, at the wife's solemn bidding, attempt to make assignations with a bewildered and unco-operative husband. The play, of course, ends with the wife's awakening jealousy, spurred on by some of those extravagantly dry martinis which have a way of getting improbable last-act curtains down.

None of this has any real gaiety about it. It is farce without effervescence, satire—nay, burlesque—without apparent point. The authors labor their psychiatric terminology as though none of us had ever seen "Lady in the Dark," and when they feel the need for some random theatrical excitement they can think of nothing better than throwing chessboards out of penthouse windows.

* * *

Robert Cummings does all he can to cheer up the proceedings. In fact, he is willing to do anything—bound across the stage like an antelope, spurt fizz water from his mouth, collapse in a heap on the floor. And he is an expert farceur, of the cold-blooded, toothy, dynamic school. Again and again he turns a commonplace piece of stage business into something expertly timed and pantomimically very funny. When he is asked to telephone his sister, who is under the hair drier in a beauty parlor, to inquire where she was on the day of his wedding ten years earlier, he achieves a little tour de force of nervous panic. He can handle props for maximum effect and he can inflect an ordinary line of dialogue into a resounding laugh. He is, in short, perfectly capable of playing the artificial play that should have been written around these artificial materials, and there are times when he almost succeeds in playing this one.

* * *

Ann Sothern is not so fortunate. She begins winningly, in a little speech before the curtain which introduces the play, and she brings a crisp delivery and a doll-like attractiveness to everything else that she does. But the lines will not support her, and she is not a technical virtuoso in the Cummings—or latter-day Edward Everett Horton—manner. As a result, she is left at the post, through no fault of her own, and it is cold there.

Philip Bourneuf plays the psychiatrist indifferently. This may be due to the fact that he is a recent cast replacement, or it may be due to an honest bewilderment as to how so preposterous a character—even for farce—managed to find its way to the professional stage. Beverly Whitney, in what is apparently her Broadway debut, is an exceptionally attractive young actress, and we are likely to be seeing more of her. Paul Morrison's penthouse setting is handsome indeed, and Adrian has done well by Miss Sothern's gowns. Richard Whorf has been faced with the problem of finding a suitable directorial style for a hollow and finally exasperating farce, and if he has not found it, he cannot really be held to blame.

**Daily Mirror**

October 19, 1951

## 'Faithfully Yours' Old Hat In a Smart Showcase

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Faithfully Yours," which Richard W. Krakeur brought to the Coronet Theatre last evening, is old hat in a smart showcase. Paul Morrison has designed one of the most attractive settings we have glimpsed in recent seasons, and it's too bad L. Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay haven't come through with a play worthy of it.

The farce has to do with a screwball wife addicted to fads. After trying her hand at ballet and painting, she takes to psychiatry. Prompted by a $50-an-hour quack, who would like to lure her to his own hideaway in the Poconos, she begins to suspect her husband of having slipped his trolley.

The unfortunate spouse, who really loves his wacky wife after 10 years of marriage, in turn thinks she has slipped a cog or two, and tries to humor her by paying attention to three of her friends. In fact, he even hires a rival psychoanalyst to help him cure her. Everything turns out happily in the end, and the pseudo-scientist gets a kick in the pants.

This is the type of script that seemed so modern and sophisticated back in the days when avant garde theatre groups were on the prowl in Greenwich Village. It recalls memories for instance, of Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires," circa 1917. And that was a more solid and amusing satire on psychoanalysis than "Faithfully Yours."

The new arrival is frothy, frantic and fatuous. True, it has some hilarious moments, thanks to the skillfull pretending of an excellent cast, beautifully coached by Richard Whorf. In justice to all concerned, we must record that a knowing first-night audience seemed to find it all very enjoyable. The premierites were generous with their laughter and applause. The hardiest yaks, incidentally, came from the distaff side.

Ann Sothern and Robert Cummings, as the Mr. and Mrs. victimized by the lecherous phony, prove superlative farceurs. They take a thin bubble and keep it whirling in air long after its supporting gas has escaped. We hope Hollywood won't recapture them before they find a play worthy of their talents.

An especial salute also is due Victor Wood, who makes the vacuous role of a butler important. Wood, in our book, is one of the best character actors around today. Philip Bourneuf merits a bow for his performance as the romantic quack. Called in as a last minute replacement, he came through with flying colors.

There are other helpful contributions from Marguerite Gould, Eileen Erskine, Doreen Lang, Florence Sundstrom, Beverly Whitney and Barbara Barondess MacLean.

"Faithfully Yours" is essentially aimed at the femme trade. The ladies about us last night were having a wonderful time, admiring particularly the dazzling costumes by an un-programmed designer. But, after all, this mere male wants something more, than outstanding actiag and a gorgeous fashion show. He likes a play along with these assets.

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Journal American

October 19, 1951

## Very Little Action But Lots of Chit-Chat

By ROBERT GARLAND

All this chit-chat about psychoanalysis is out-dated. It may have had the charm of novelty when the Washington Square Players were presenting "Suppressed Desires" at the Comedy. But last night, at the Coronet, "Faithfully Yours" did not belong. I wondered what it was doing there.

I really know. It is part of the back-to-Broadway movement taking place in Hollywood. Robert Cummings used to go under the name of Blade Stanhope Conway for serious plays and Brice Hutchens for musicals. Ann Sothern, in "Of Thee I Sing" and "America's Sweetheart," was Harriette Lake.

"Faithfully Yours," their present starring vehicle, is based on a French play by Jean Barnard-Luc. It was called "The Philemon Complex" on the road. But, deciding to come to town, it changed its name and headed for 49th Street. And there it is, under the direction of Richard Whorf.

As long as it is determined to be there, I wish Mr. Whorf would make Mr. Cummings and Miss Sothern act in the same school of acting. As it is, our hero plays farce and our heroine plays comedy. And farce is the only way "Faithfully Yours" can be played in this season of 1951-1952.

• • •

Here's the story, adapted into English, "Faithfully Yours" sets out to tell. Thomas and Vivian Harding are a happily married couple. Thomas, getting home from Wall Street, likes his woman beautiful but dumb. And there is Vivian, the answer to his prayer without going out for her.

But Vivian certainly does need something male to occupy her while Thomas is in Wall Street. Dr. Peter Wilson is provided. He is a psychoanalyst. And he gets Vivian all mixed up in her penthouse on Park Avenue. And Vivian, in turn, has a mixed up effect on Thomas and her close girl friends.

By the time the second act comes along, "Faithfully Yours" is at sixes and sevens. And sixes and sevens are not lucky numbers at the Coronet. Whatever of your patience is left, is dissipated. Vivian can't be even half the fool she is, and live. Not even in a farce, when played farcically.

So "Faithfully Yours" just continues to talk on until it's time to call it a play. Then, for no other reason, Thomas suddenly sees the light, Vivian suddenly sees Thomas and that is that for them. Or maybe its the other way around. But the play is over and psychoanalysis has been revived after all these years.

• • •

Robert Cummings, as he now calls himself, acts "Faithfully Yours," as it now calls itself, as if it were a farce. It is a farce, so I prefer his acting. He carries on well after the play has limped out on him, but, at last, he can hold out no longer. What can you do after you've done your best?

Ann Sothern, as she now calls herself, acts the erstwhile "Philemon Complex" as if it were a comedy. It isn't, so I don't prefer her acting. She is pretty enough in some West Coast finery and carries herself with quite a California air. She carries herself far better than she carries the play.

The featured player Philip Bourneuf, is Dr. Peter Wilson, the psychoanalyst. He is an old-fashioned bad-man, all right. Doreen Lang does as a momentary Miss Parker and does it charmingly. In fact, none of the supporting cast can be adversely criticized for unthoughtful acting.

It's just that "Faithfully Yours" isn't mine, faithfully or otherwise. Not that it's very, very bad. But it isn't very, very good, either. And, all dressed up in Paul Morrison's single setting, it doesn't seem to have anywhere to go, either. And it can't stay in one place all evening.

It nearly does, though, at the Coronet. And chit-chats!

DAILY NEWS

October 19, 1951

# 'Faithfully Yours' Mildly Funny

By JOHN CHAPMAN

As this new theatre season doggedly plods on, I look back with an affection I never thought I'd have to an early entrant, "Bagels and Yox." The audience at this show got, and probably still is getting, something solid out of it—free bagels. Which is more nourishment than I have obtained from most of our straight plays, including last night's comedy at the Coronet Theatre, "Faithfully Yours."

This piece is like most of the others—attractively and even ably played by some charming people, but thin and desperate in the writing. To date, this season's dramatists, including all old pros except Bernard Shaw, have been writing like amateurs. They have basically entertaining ideas and then they proceed to get stuck with them. Last evening's delinquents were L. Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay, who thought they could make something saucy out of a French sex comedy by Jean Bernard-Luc. They should try for better Luc next time.

And so should the stars, Robert Cummings and Ann Sothern, for these two screenland favorites have not forgotten their original stage training and are entirely able to lend zip and sparkle to a solid comedy. Whenever they get the chance they put zip and sparkle into "Faithfully Yours," but they are forced to spend too much of their time—and mine—waiting for the next joke.

**Love Ain't Normal.**

Mr. Cummings and Miss Sothern are simply crazy about each other after ten years of marriage. A psychiatrist, Philip Bourneuf, thinks this is abnormal—maybe dirty. Since Miss Sothern is prettier, even, than Mr. Cummings, Dr. Bourneuf decides he will psychoanalyze the husband through the wife, and the wife falls for this thin device. She even gets her three best friends to offer their all to her spouse in order to cure him of the innocent ailment of loving only one woman.

Miss Sothern, being agreeable as well as attractive, believes this nonsense—but I didn't right from the start, and that is why I think that "Faithfully Yours" is shakily built on a false foundation. Recently James Proctor got a great deal of fun out of psychiatry in a novel, "The Man on the Couch." He proved that the noodle-doctors and their patients can be genuinely comic. But Mr. Bush-Fekete, Miss Fay and Monsieur Bernard-Luc have missed their target, broad as it is. Perhaps they should have their heads examined.

# "Buy Me Blue Ribbons"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 18, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

*Walter F. Kerr, drama critic of "The Commonweal," will be the guest critic of the Herald Tribune during the fall season.*

***Won't Win Any Ribbons***

JAY ROBINSON, producer and virtually star of "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," is a young man of twenty-one who was last season dispossessed of a leading role in a play which he had himself financed. Mr. Robinson is apparently not bitter about this. He has had Sumner Locke Elliott write a play for him, a comedy about a young man who is similarly thrown out of his own production, and he is offering it, for his mortification and for ours, at the Empire Theatre.

Mr. Robinson is unembarrassed by this display of dramatic incest. He puts himself on the block, allows himself to be ridiculed for his own pretensions, even permits a considerable amount of gagging at the expense of his virility. He is determined to seem knowing about his incapacities at the same time that he is determined to feature himself in a Broadway play. The mind reels.

* * *

Actually, the play which Mr. Robinson has had commissioned for him is not too bad as a stock farce enterprise. It moves with relatively little awkwardness, it handles its stereotyped show-business characters with an ease born of familiarity, and it has, now and then, some bright lines. One of these days, with a good juvenile comedian in the leading role, it is going to make the author a little money in the summer theaters.

Whatever small praise may be eked out for the play, however, is shot to pieces the minute Mr. Robinson enters it. The producer-actor is not only young in years; he is young in experience, young in wisdom, young as young can be.

* * *

He has picked up somewhere what used to be called a 'stage' accent, a habit of pulling his mouth tightly closed to indicate that he has just got off a good one, and a nice, tricky way of banging on doors as he opens them. He enters with a rush and drapes himself across a balcony, just as though he were in a play. He strikes poses. And even when this kind of activity is meant to be satiric—the character Mr. Robinson plays is supposed to attitudinize in just this way—you know that you are really dealing with Mr. Robinson himself and that the satire is essentially fake. It is no fun to poke fun at so ambitious and industrious a young man. But he has asked for it, and to let him off would render no service to a theatre which is already in serious enough straits. Mr. Robinson is not up to the course he has set for himself. In the play, the character concludes by giving up his dreams of overnight stardom and deciding to learn his trade from the bottom up. All Mr. Robinson can honestly do now is to take his own advice. At the moment, he is suffering from delusions of adequacy.

* * *

It must be said that he has done much better as a producer than as his own star. He has assembled a company of wonderfully attractive people. From his own point of view, it may well have been a mistake to surround himself with such accomplished technicians as Enid Markey, Audrey Christie and Vicki Cummings, but it is possible to work up a twinge of gratitude to him for having brought them together. Enid Markey is all delight as the boy's doting and addled mother; she has an astonishing capacity for projecting exuberance and dismay in the same expression, and some one, even Sumner Locke Elliott should write a play for her immediately.

Audrey Christie does not get many of the play's better lines, but she has an assortment of grunts, snarls and trailing ad libs which do very well as a substitute. Vicki Cummings gets some threaty, caricatured fun out of an actress who is a good bit more virile than her leading man, and Philippa Bevans is fine in the very brief part of Nurse Fiske.

There is nothing wrong with Cyril Ritchard's stage direction except his unaccountable failure to persuade Mr. Robinson to step aside during the second week of rehearsal. This might have led to another play recounting these experiences next season, then another the season after that, and so on almost indefinitely, providing a lot of employment for everybody.

**"BUY ME BLUE RIBBONS"**

Comedy by Sumner Locke Elliott; staged by Cyril Ritchard; setting by Jack Landau; presented by Jay Robinson at the Empire Theatre, October 17, 1951. The cast:

Maude.....Kate Harrington
Norma Cusack..Cynthia Latham
Daisy Sable.....Enid Markey
Liz Kendall....Audrey Christie
Jordan Sable.....Jay Robinson
Professor Oscar Nimrod....
Wells Richardson
Victor Hatfield...Gavin Gordon
Camilla Ransome.....
Vicki Cummings
Alvin Sable.....Jack Hartley
Nurse Fiske...Philippa Bevans

Synopsis: Jordan Sable's duplex apartment on Park Ave. The present. Act I. A morning in late fall. Act II. Late afternoon two weeks later. Act III. Scene 1. Early evening, three weeks later. Scene 2. The following morning.

## The New York Times

October 18, 1951

### Jay Robinson the Featured Performer in His Own Production of 'Buy Me Blue Ribbons'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In order to appreciate "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," acted at the Empire last evening, you have to know some of the background. It is a dramatization of an episode in the life of Jay Robinson, who is the producer and the featured actor. Last February Mr. Robinson organized a revival of "The Green Bay Tree" so that he could play one of the leading parts. During the rehearsal period he agreed with his associates that he was not up to the part, and he retired from his own production.

Possibly that was not one of the most important episodes in the annals of the theatre, nor of human civilization either. But it seemed so vital to Mr. Robinson that he related it to Sumner Locke Elliott, who has written a farce on the theme. Robinson is the producer, Robinson is the featured player, Robinson is the center of the farce proceedings.

* * *

"Buy Me Blue Ribbons" is a stock farce about a vain and repulsive young motion picture star who produces a poetic drama in which he expects to play the leading part. In the course of the rehearsals he is let out. Someone else makes a great success in the part for which he is inadequate.

Mr. Elliott's antic is broad and noisy. It belabors the motion picture actor with a good deal of mechanical heartiness; and, in fact, manages to whack nearly everyone over the head or on the seat of the pants. Some amusing actors join in the round of insults—Vicki Cummings as a poisonous prima donna, Audrey Christie as a cynical agent, Enid Markey as the maudlin mother of a prodigy, and quite a lot of others, too. Jack Landau has provided a sleek, bright, luxurious setting, and Cyril Ritchard has directed with a circus ringmaster's whip.

But logic brings us straight back to the place where we came in. Is Mr. Robinson any better fitted to play the leading part in "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" than he was to play one of the leading parts in "The Green Bay Tree"? To coin a phrase, no. If he were not the producer of "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" he would not be its featured player, for he has not yet learned how to stand or walk on the stage; and his impersonation of himself is not as interesting to the audience as it is to him.

* * *

Two years ago Mr. Robinson acquitted himself very ably in a small part in the Katharine Hepburn "As You Like It." Several more experienced actors dominated the performance, and that was an agreeable balance of forces. "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" proves nothing except that Mr. Robinson was wise in excluding himself from the cast of "The Green Bay Tree." Like Iran, he is not ready.

## Daily Mirror

October 18, 1951

### 'Buy Me Blue Ribbons' All Tied Up in Knots

By ROBERT COLEMAN

A good idea for an amusing and moving tragic-comedy went awry last evening at the Empire Theatre, where Jay Robinson presented Jay Robinson in "Buy Me Blue Ribbons." The new arrival is attributed to the typewriter of Sumner Locke Elliott, and we wonder if he isn't Jay Robinson, too.

The play has to do with a spoiled, passe movie juvenile who grows out of Lord Faunleroy roles and tries to buy his way to stardom on Broadway. In this he fails, but his ego is merely blunted temporarily. At the final curtain's fall, he's at it again, seeking to cajole headlines after accepting a minor part in a Shakespearean revival.

According to a note in the Empire program, the comedy, which is really an incredible farce, is said to have been suggested by some of producer-star Robinson's own experiences in the theatre. All the elements are present for a funny and touching script, but they have been dissipated through bad casting of the central role and frantic direction by Cyril Ritchard.

Some of the lines are clever, but too many of them merely make ridiculous references to well-known people. Before the evening was over, we had scanned the headings of many pages of Who's Who. It got to be monotonously taxing after a while.

Jordon Sable should be someone to gain your sympathy. He is the victim of a doting mother and a negligent father. Instead, he is frightfully annoying. As his harassed agent puts it, "a Lucky Luciano in knee-pants." Robinson plays Sable with irritating flamboyance. He never permits you to feel sorry for the unfortunate youngster.

The part is keyed to a shrill petulant pitch, and kept there for three acts. Nuances, shadings, are missing. Director Ritchard evidently decided to make him the butt of a tasteless joke, rather than a misguided adolescent trying to find himself.

Producer Robinson has filled the other roles with some of Broadway's most skillful performers. Audrey Christie and Vicki Cummings fare best. They know what to do with a situation or a laugh when one comes their way. They can really turn it on when the chips are down.

Enid Markey, Cynthia Latham, Kate Harrington, Gavin Gordon, Jak Hartley, Wells Richardson and Philippa Bevans make the most of their opportunities, particularly Miss Bevans as a nurse who knows how to force a sedative down a temperamental patien's throat.

"Buy Me Blue Ribbons" fairly cried for a George Kelly or a Moss Hart to take over the reins. Their interpretations would have been different, but certainly sound. As it is, the Empire's latest tenant is a case of could have been but isn't.

## DAILY NEWS

October 18, 1951

### Maybe 'Buy Me Blue Ribbons' Was Better in Real Life Than It Is Now

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Jay Robinson, age 21, produced a hand-written comedy about himself at the Empire Theatre last evening. Titled "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" and written to order by Sumner Locke Elliott, the play has some amusing lines and a cast which is willing and able to entertain—but it's a pretty awkward and ragged job. I suspect that it leaves young Mr. Robinson right where he started, which is looking for a play worthy of his determination.

A few seasons ago the young man gave a vivid performance in a play about a neurotic misfit, titled "Gayden." Last season he achieved a long-standing ambition by bringing about a revival of "The Green Bay Tree," in which he was to have the role of the sexually confused boy. In rehearsal it was discovered that Mr. Robinson was "not right" for the role, and he gallantly withdrew even though it was his show.

**Some Expert Help.**

And that is the plot of "Buy Me Blue Ribbons." Playing an ageing film-star seeking a comeback (he is 18 and his days as an adored screen tot are behind him), he buys a play, hires a director and arranges to star himself. As a leading actor he is inadequate and is forced out of the cast. The fact that his production becomes a hit is small comfort.

The young man is all right in a quite poisonous role, being overbearing toward his betters and managing to be quite awful in a rehearsal scene in which, as a lusty pirate, he is supposed to ravish Miss Vicki Cummings in rhymed couplets. This is a funny scene. Playwright Elliott also has managed to fetch up some short, smart cracks for Miss Cummings, Audrey Christie and Enid Markey—and these ladies, being old hands at comedy, know exactly what to do with them. Miss Markey is excellent as the boy actor's doting and dizzy mother. The company also includes such men and women of experience as Gavin Gordon, Jack Hartley, Wells Richardson, Philippa Bevans and Cynthia Latham.

Once in a while a "Royal Family" does come along, but, generally speaking, plays about stage folk don't turn out to be very interesting. Many actors can impersonate people quite successfully, but asking an actor to impersonate an actor puts a hell of a strain on him.

## New York Post

October 18, 1951

### By Richard Watts Jr.

## A Dim Comedy About the Theater

It is no doubt of keen personal interest to the young actor-producer named Jay Robinson that a comedy has been written that is said to parallel his own career in the theater. But Sumner Locke Elliott's "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," which Mr. Robinson produced and acted in at the Empire last night, certainly isn't helped as entertainment for outsiders by the fact that it happens to deal with his case history. Indeed, it gives the play, which is pretty bad to start with, the additional handicap of being embarrassing.

The basic situation of "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" offers, I will concede, the possibility of an entertaining comedy about show business. It tells how a rich young man, with a lot of temperament and ambition to be an actor, is persuaded to back a romantic drama in which he is to play the lead. When it develops that the part is beyond him, he is forced by the leading actress and the manager to leave the cast, which causes him to have tantrums. It has been pointed out in the advance publicity that this has something or other to do with Mr. Robinson's actual life in art.

**Determined Actors**

But, even if the embarrassment resulting from the personal identification and the uncomfortable feeling that you are watching a performer psychoanalyze himself were absent, Mr. Elliott's comedy still wouldn't have been entertaining. Despite the opportunities for affectionate mocking of the idiosyncrasies of play production, "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" is strangely lugubrious going, offering the always stupifying sight of actors trying gamely to be funny but being thrown by their material.

There are all sorts of references to famous people in the theater and lines that are intended to be witty, ironic and knowing about the curious business of putting on a play, but somehow none of them works out. There are two or three passably funny remarks and observations, but the fun is only too rarely forthcoming. "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" has a reasonably tedious first act, after which things change just a bit. They get worse. I'm afraid there will be something additionally ironic tonight about the scene in which the characters read enthusiastic reviews of the play they have produced.

**Type Casting**

It may, as the publicity releases insist on pointing out, be true that Mr. Robinson is type-cast in the role of the temperamental young man who wants to be a star, but I still can't think that he plays it very well. He has picked up quite a lot of mannerisms during his few years in the theater, and he uses them emphatically in the course of his performance. Nor is he exactly what could be called an ingratiating player. I suspect that someone else might have portrayed him in somewhat more engaging fashion.

I can say for Mr. Robinson however, that he is generous towards his supporting actors. When things grow dull, which is frequently, he doesn't mind stopping the proceedings while the other players go into their specialities. Thus we have Vicki Cummings doing a believeable parody of a mannered stage star, Enid Markey offering her invariably entertaining nitwit impersonation, and Audrey Christie in her skillful portrait of a girl of experience. But they can't bring about a satisfactory evening. And the Empire is such an attractive theater.

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## Journal American

October 18, 1951

# Talks Itself Around In Futile Circles

**By ROBERT GARLAND**

Jay Robinson has bought himself "Buy Me Blue Ribbons.". And, at the Empire, he has produced it with himself first featured. Sumner Locke Elliott is the author. Cyril Ritchard is the director. Jack Landau is the designer. Mr. Robinson must be the moving spirit.

**To put "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" over, there are three press representatives—one plain, one general, one assistant. From these I gather that Sumner Locke Elliott has written a play that parallels the life of Jay Robinson. Mr. Robinson's life hasn't been very interesting.**

Mr. Robinson's life hasn't been interesting at all, really. To the contrary. And it doesn't get anywhere, either. Assisted by players such as Audrey Christie, Vicki Cummings, Enid Markey, Gavin Gordon and Jack Hartley, it merely talks itself around in futile circles.

**This, the players seem to know. They seem discouraged about the entire matter. But they don't seem to care. If a man named Jay Robinson wants to do such a thing, all right. But why should they help him do it?**

There's only one answer. And that, I'm sure, is it.

* * *

### As Simple as That

The story of Jay Robinson's life, as outlined in "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," is obvious: an actor, to be an actor and not just another person on the stage, should learn to act. It's as simple as all that. And as true. And as heartbreaking, too.

**Jay Robinson is living under the name of Jordon Sable in a duplex apartment on Park Avenue. He is also acting in a play. He owns it. That's why he's acting in it. He's so incompetent that the director asks him to quit in favor of a more competent man.**

This he does. And the play is a success without his histrionics, but with the histrionics of the other fellow. This is a lesson to him. Next time—there always is a next time for a man with money—he'll begin at the beginning.

**He tells you how. He'll get himself a job at the City Center of Music and Drama under the direction of Margaret Webster. There, at our expense, he'll play minor characters of William Shakespeare. Or of Bernard Shaw, now Miss Webster has turned that way.**

This'll lead to Hamlet. Or to the outskirts of St. Joan.

As Jordon Sable, Jay Robinson is aware of everything that's going on. And coming off, I dare say. Personally, I don't believe his Jordon Sable has a chance. But, although he looks more than his advertised age of 21, we have plenty of time to see. We shall!

**Taking the minor featured players as they come, Audrey Christie is almost herself as Liz Kendall; Vicki Cummings is almost herself as Camilla Ransome and Enid Markey is almost herself as Daisy Sable, the would-be actor's mother who must be on his payroll.**

There are others, two of whom are also featured, who run in and out of Jay Robinson's drawing-room. I forget their names and I don't know what they're supposed to be. One, I think, rewrites the play within "Buy Me Blue Ribbons." The other is a well trained nurse.

**The City Center of Music and Drama and Margaret Webster do not actually appear. But there're spoken of with veneration, especially in the last scene of the last act when the plot of the play and the patience of the customers is wearing thin.**

That's all of "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" for today. Or for any day!

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

October 18, 1951

# Jay Robinson Stars As Jay Robinson

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It is hardly news any more that "Buy Me Blue Ribbons," produced by Jay Robinson, who also plays the leading role, is based on an actual incident of his own recent career.

With dramatic license, Sumner Locke Elliott has evolved a comedy about the attempted comeback of a boy picture star. The slightly matured prodigy produces a poetic drama to star himself. When he is dismissed as inadequate the play becomes a great hit. On his agent's advice he accepts a bit role in another production, but immediately begins a gigantic publicity campaign about himself.

It must be easy to see how the wheels within wheels can be downright embarrassing.

**Budding Humor.**

The play itself is well on the way toward being a highly respectable comedy of a mild and fluffy type. Cyril Ritchard has directed it so it buds all over with humorous ideas.

Probably because it lacks adequate trying out, it seems desperately to need tightening and honing. The actors are for the most part giving stock company performances. They offer unembellished basic ideas for characterizations, rather than theatrical creations.

As the young star Robinson fails to distinguish between being a character and acting it. He plays with bitter affectation, which is unrelaxed rather than humorous. Where the role needs to be laughed at he congratulates it. This made me most uneasy.

**Three Comediennes.**

Any play with three comediennes is likely to hit air pockets en route. "Buy Me Blue Ribbons" keeps a level course by making the girls take turns.

Enid Markey as the indulgent mother of the youth fares best in a nitwit reading that manages to be quite touching while consistently provocative of laughs.

Audrey Christie makes the role of the boy's agent pay off for her in the scene where she relates to him the mishaps of the dress rehearsal of the play in which he does not appear.

As the grand actress Vicki Cummings relies on a hoarse, superior snarl and a bored lope to depict the artiest of hams.

In smaller roles of a secretary and a nurse Cynthia Latham and Philippa Bevans add minor embroidery to the proceedings.

If you ignore the facts behind this production, it simply lacks the starch to hold comic shape. Consider the facts, and its complex origin and split motive give it an irksome air.

# "A Sleep of Prisoners"

The New York Times

October 17, 1951

## AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In a grave and reverent mood, Christopher Fry has written a generally elusive drama. He composed "A Sleep of Prisoners" last spring for the Religious Drama Society in England, where it was acted in several churches. Three of the original four English actors have now brought it to St. James' Church, Madison Avenue at Seventy-first Street, where it opened last evening for a limited engagement.

Everyone who saw "The Lady's Not for Burning" is familiar with Mr. Fry's gifts as a poet and his marvelous facility with words and images. His interest in writing brief religious dramas is not so widely known. But "A Sleep of Prisoners" is one of several he has written in verse form for acting in churches.

It is the story of four prisoners of war confined to a church in some foreign country. Four rough bunks are placed in the chancel, which serves as the stage. There is no curtain. Since the play is in one act and a little less than two hours in length, there is no intermission. Excepting for Abe Feder's lighting, there is very little of the paraphernalia of the theatre in this modern mystery about good and evil and the valor of men who have the faith to explore the meaning of God.

In the last brief scene Mr. Fry states his theme in some of his most eloquent verse. In view of the earnestness of his faith, the verse is a little casual, for Mr. Fry is a modern and avoids spiritual eloquence. But the reverent counsel Private Meadows gives his comrades in the last five or ten minutes of the play is both moving and beautiful, for it recognizes the nobility of the human race to go forward through the centuries "with a long courage of truth."

But it is to be feared that most of "A Sleep of Prisoners" is nebulous and diffuse and very difficult to assimilate from even an excellent performance. Mr. Fry's prisoners are naturally disheartened by their misfortune; they are inclined to be irritable with each other and they are overwhelmed by the mystery of their function in the world.

Three of them explore the mystery in separate dreams that turn out to be improvisations of Bible stories—the story of Cain and Abel, the story of David and Absalom, and finally the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Presumably these stories illustrate the fundamental relationships of men. The last one shows how men of loyalty and fortitude can survive the holocausts of civilization.

But these are conclusions that a theatregoer must make for himself. For Mr. Fry may be using words to express an emotional mood, but he does not convey much information. Although something of spiritual importance appears to be going on through the dream sequences, Mr. Fry does not bother to make it tangible or clear. He is off in some private reverie amid his words and visions. "A Sleep of Prisoners" looks more like a drama written to order than the declaration of a man of letters who wants to communicate convictions to an audience.

In view of the elusiveness of the poetry and the story, the concrete authority of the performance must be recognized as a considerable achievement. Michael MacOwan has designed it with great skill, finding a thread of narrative through the sea of words, making the transitions intelligible from reality into the dreams and putting some muscle and blood into Mr. Fry's spiritual inquiry.

Thank the actors also for speaking the English language with grace and clarity. Having mastered Mr. Fry's verse, they use it beautifully. They are Leonard White, Hugh Pryse and Stanley Baker, who have played their respective parts in England, and Donald Harron, who is substituting for Denholm Elliott. Their performance has the force and humanity of a tale of modern soldiers; it is frank, homely, tense and devout. It is also a good deal more lucid than Mr. Fry's religious fancy.

Mr. Fry does not bother to make it tangible or clear. He is off in some

**"A SLEEP OF PRISONERS"**

Play by Christopher Fry; staged by Michael MacOwan; lighting by Abe Feder; presented by Luther Greene at St. James' Church, October 16, 1951. The cast:

Pvt. David King..Leonard White
Pvt. Peter Able..Donald Harron
Cpl. Joseph Adams.....
Stanley Baker
Pvt. Tim Meadows..Hugh Pryse

Synopsis: The church, which is presumed to be in a foreign country, is being used as a temporary prison camp. The action is continuous and there will be no intermission. The word "Towzer" which occurs during the dialogue is an imaginary nickname for the enemy.

DAILY NEWS
October 17, 1951

# 'A Sleep of Prisoners' in a Church

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I am not sure yet, and I may never be sure, whether Christopher Fry's long one-act drama, "A Sleep of Prisoners," is a very interesting ecclesiastical experiment or a mildly interesting theatrical adventure.

One thing I can say about it for certain is that it is not a showman's stunt, even though it is being presented in St. James' Church, Madison Ave. at 71st St. It is serious theatre which makes effective use of a house of worship.

Mr. Fry, writing in his usual high-flown style, is pondering the sad fate of man, who is doomed to be man. As one of his four characters puts it, in a dream in which he believes he is the Biblical Cain, "Flesh is my birthplace." Flesh is man's prison, and a cruel one, and love is the only hope of escape.

**Assume Bible Characters.**

There are only four men in the cast of "A Sleep of Prisoners." They are prisoners of a modern war and have been jailed in a church. Here, on rough bunks strewn about the altar, they sleep fitfully and dream of themselves and each other. In their religious surroundings their dreams are of the Testament, and they are Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, David and Absalom or Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego.

The staging and lighting, by Michael MacOwan and Abe Feder, are simple and startlingly effective. The sleeping men vanish from their bunks unnoticeably and step forth as characters from their dreams. The actors—Leonard White, Donald Harron, Stanley Baker and Hugh Pryse—speak clearly and forcefully, and are a picturesque assortment of PWs.

**A Generous Impulse.**

May I be churlish enough, or stupid enough, to comment that the actors speak more clearly and more forcefully than does their playwright, Mr. Fry? It seems to my inadequate mind that the author, following a generous impulse, has compounded no small amount of confusion. His play, though short, is wordy, and his thoughts, though noble, are pompous. It is very interesting as an unusual event in a church, but neither absorbing nor moving as a piece of theatre.

"A Sleep of Prisoners" was written by London's Christopher Fry at the behest of the Religious Drama Society, which wanted something for the recent Festival of Britain. It was played first in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, next in St. Thomas' church, London, and then in various churches in the British hinterland. The New York production, offered by Luther Greene, is for the benefit of three religious organizations and an experimental theatre. Its present setting, St. James' church, is a handsome one — and is excellent acoustically.

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NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 17, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

*Walter F. Kerr, drama critic of "The Commonweal," will be the guest critic of the Herald Tribune during the fall season.*

*Ecclesiastical First-Night*

IN "A SLEEP OF PRISONERS," Christopher Fry has written a vigorous, dignified, and overly intellectualized parable for our time. The play was conceived as Mr. Fry's contribution to the Festival of Britain, was intended for church performance, and is not meant to compete, in a theatrical sense, with the dazzling verse comedies which have come from the author in the last few years.

Since Mr. Fry's pretensions are clearly modest, and since he has gone about his work with obvious good will, it is only fair to judge the play on its own terms. It cannot have the verbal exuberance of his lighter pieces, and, being a parable, it cannot have the taut narrative excitement of a concrete story filled with flesh-and-blood people. It can, and does, have Fry's perceptiveness for the small and telling detail, his vivid sense of the theatrical picture, and his special gift for blending the idiomatic with the lyrical in language. It should have—and here, unfortunately, is where Mr. Fry falls down—an absolute clarity of thought which would make the final sermon striking and profitable.

* * *

"A Sleep of Prisoners" is concerned with the desperate state of modern man, the fiery prison he has made for himself, and the problem we all face in getting out of it. By way of illustration, the author has assembled four men in a prison camp: a hard-headed Corporal, an old man who has slipped into the army through the back door, and two contrasting figures who serve as the pivot for Mr. Fry's lecture—David King, man of action, and Peter Able, man of inaction. The play has no sooner begun than David is at Peter's throat, unable to tolerate the passive man's indifference to their present plight and to the state of the world in general. He is prevented from throttling Peter by the others, and the four settle down for the night. The rest of the play counts off their dreams, and each man's interpretation of the emotional crisis which has taken place. The old man sees the David-Peter struggle in the ever-simplified, primitive terms of Cain and Abel. David sees himself as David the King, righteously ordering the destruction of his irresponsible son, Absalom. Peter sees himself as Isaac, innocent victim of a sacrificial rite which he does not pretend to understand. Finally, the Corporal sees himself, David, and Peter as a trio of sacrificial victims—Shadrac, Meshac and Abednego — equally condemned, none really understanding the other.

* * *

The play concludes with the discovery, on the part of all three, that the furnace into which they must march does not destroy them, that, through patience, love, and honesty there is a way out for us all. There is a great deal of hopeful affirmation in this ending. Fry has even had his characters "Thank God our time is now" because new affairs have become soul-size and require the very kind of heroic spiritual effort which may result in ultimate success and ultimate sanctity.

But the affirmation is verbal. It does not flow from any logic in the illustrations which have preceded it. It does not come out of the characters themselves, a result of the spiritual holocaust they have endured; rather, the old man must recite it to them, convey in a mere speech what ought to have been realized dramatically in the running clash between David and Peter. David and Peter themselves are not perfectly realized symbols. David, by far the clearer of the two, is the man of action, the man who must act or go mad, even when he does not understand what he is doing, and with "whatever damned result." Peter is more ambiguous; he is at one time the dreamer, the philosopher, the contemplative who watches history, but does not make it; at other times, he is something of a cynic, an irresponsible, and his precise function as a contrast to David is left in doubt.

It is difficult, then, at the end of the play to say where Mr. Fry places his precise blame for the mess we are in. He seems to pin it on David, the vigorous animal, and he does bring David to a recognition of his error. But Peter's share in the common guilt is left vague, and he is provided with no realization of his own defects. As a result, the conflict which has engaged us all evening dissipates itself, blurs to the fringes, at the very moment when it should strike home most forcibly.

The company, imported from London, give virile and disciplined performances on a tricky and limited stage. Leonard White, as David, is at his best in the Absalom scene, at his least effective in the Abraham-Isaac sequence where the script itself is most static. Donald Harron does well by the various reincarnations of Peter, though he is hampered by the role's basic lack of definition. Stanley Baker, as the Corporal, has one of the play's more moving moments in his appeal to Eve over the body of Abel, and Hugh Pryse proves an effective foil to the younger men, handling the few light moments which Fry has allotted the play extremely well. Michael MacOwan's stage direction puts a good bit of bite into what must inevitably be a talky and occasionally repetitious allegory, sometimes just a shade more bite than the close quarters of St. James' Church will stand.

## New York Post

October 17, 1951

### By Richard Watts Jr.

### Christopher Fry's Enigmatic Play

Historically, the theater was going back to its fundamentals last night, when Christopher Fry's new drama, "A Sleep of Prisoners," was presented in St. James' Church, Madison Av. at 71st St. Written specifically for this form of presentation, Mr. Fry's play is most decidedly not stage entertainment as we customarily think of it these days, and it would be unfair both to it and its potential audiences if this were not made clear. Even for the most sympathetic and contemplative spectator, it is not an easy work to appreciate. You must meet it more than halfway, but I think that is an effort worth making.

Mr. Fry is a playwright who apparently never tries to compromise with the medium in which he is working. In a manner both intellectually and artistically arrogant, he refuses to say anything simply and directly when he can say it complexly and deviously, and his verse, while capable of a subtle eloquence, is philosophical rather than dramatic. His appeal is certainly more to the mind than to the emotions, and he seems to prefer capturing his effects by suggestion and implication, instead of by any direct approach. There is a sort of intellectual perverseness about him that pervades everything he writes.

**Four Soldiers**

In "A Sleep of Prisoners," he is telling of four British soldiers, captured by the enemy and imprisoned in a church, but it is the transcendent philosophical aspects of the situation, and very definitely not the personal or dramatic values, that concern him. In their restless sleep, the prisoners, under the influence of their surroundings, think of themselves as biblical figures, and the main portion of the play deals with their four dreams, in which they are shown as they appear to themselves and to their companions. It is not a difficult theatrical formula, but Mr. Fry's musings on the topic are far from simple.

One of the prisoners has, in a moment of blind anger, tried to strangle another, and the biblical dream scenes parallel this hysterical episode. To one soldier, it emerges as the slaughter of Abel by Cain. To the second, it is the story of King David and his disloyal son, Absolom. The man who has been almost killed thinks of himself as Isaac when he was about to be sacrificed by Abraham. To the fourth the matter of the strangling is not important, for he sees them as the young men in the fiery furnace. At the end, they have, Mr. Fry believes, come to understand themselves more clearly, but some spectators might incline to doubt him.

**Author's Concern**

As I say, in outline the narrative of "A Sleep of Prisoners" is straightforward enough. But this is by no means the author's chief concern. It is the philosophical and spiritual state of the four men that interests him, and I must admit that, to me, he does little in the way of clarification. Chiefly it strikes me that he makes the oldest of the prisoners too enigmatic a figure in his symbolism. It appears to be Mr. Fry's contention that his characters, by learning to face the problems of the human heart confronted by both God and the existence of evil, have won a spiritual victory.

Wisely, the producer has brought over the English cast and director, and the playing and staging are at the same time vigorous and properly concerned with the work's philosophical values. Of the actors, Leonard White, Stanley Baker and Hugh Pryse are of the original company, and Donald Harron is a newcomer, and all of them are excellent. I would be deceiving you if I pretended to know just what Mr. Fry is saying throughout his drama, because a great deal of it eluded me last night. Nor do I think this is entirely my fault. Much of "A Sleep of Prisoners" is too intellectually oblique and devious to be satisfying. It is disturbing and often exasperating, but it is a work of unusual quality, meant only for playgoers with dogged minds.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 17, 1951

## 'Sleep of Prisoners' Is Violently Reverent

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Christopher Fry's "A Sleep of Prisoners" is a tremendously exciting experience.

Vividly staged under the high vaulting roof of St. James' Church, the play has violence, frequent majesty and a lingering echo of inspiration.

Fry has offered a poetic depiction of man's trials and his search for a meaning to his life in a time of darkest trouble. Four prisoners of war are quartered in a church. During the night they dream of themselves in the position of various Biblical characters.

Adam sees the terrible guilt and aimless flight of Cain, following the murder of Abel. David learns the treachery of his son Absolom, and sees him killed. Abraham obeys God's order, and so is relieved from the sacrifices of Isaac. Finally Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are delivered from the fiery furnace.

**Reverent Play.**

The oldest of the soldiers tries to explain to the others that their survival, and their significance, lies in patience, love and honesty. He speaks of "the fabulous wings unused, that are folded in the heart" and tells them that "good has no fear."

If they feel purposeless it is for lack of searching, for he tells them "affairs are now soul-size and the enterprise is exploration into God."

The play is entirely reverent. Its frequent wildness seems always one more facet in man's flight to find the right. Most of the action occurs in the chancel, but the organ loft and aisles are effectively used.

Sudden and surprising appearances are devised in a brilliant fashion which gives the play all the irrational clarity of a tormented dream.

The cast is splendid, with Leonard White as the deeply rancorous and puzzling David; Donald Harron as the mercurial, flippant Peter; Stanley Baker as the sturdy Corporal, and Hugh Pryse playing the oldest member of the military party.

**Just One Fault.**

The opening performance suffered from one serious fault, which must be quickly corrected by the actors. They indulge in the very familiar thespian platitude of assuming that yelling amounts to emotional intensity.

In this lovely soaring church, with a big congregation gathered, the acoustics are hypersensitive. Every time an actor raises his voice over normal conversational pitch, he simply sets up reverberations and is incomprehensible. The actors must save volume for the few moments when raw emotion is more important than literal sense.